



## A Patient's Guide to Understanding Osteoarthritis



### What is osteoarthritis?

*Osteoarthritis* is a disease in which joints become painful and lose mobility. A *joint* is the place where two or more bones come together, such as the hip, knee, ankle, or foot. When they are healthy, joints allow you to walk, run, and bend without pain. When you have osteoarthritis, the *cartilage*, an elastic-like tissue that covers the ends of the bones in a joint, wears thin. Because cartilage prevents bones from grinding against each other when you move, its loss can cause pain and make it hard to walk, work, or enjoy many of your usual activities.



### How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Nearly 21 million Americans are affected by osteoarthritis. To make a correct diagnosis, your healthcare provider will want to rule out other possible causes for your symptoms. He or she will first ask you to describe your symptoms and your current and past medical history. Then, he or she will perform a physical examination to look at your joints and see how well they move. X-rays are often taken and, in some cases, blood tests and examinations of joint fluid may be needed. Your healthcare provider may also ask you to have additional tests done, such as *magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)* or a *computed tomography (CAT) scan* or bone scan, which will provide a better view of your joints.



### What are the treatments for osteoarthritis?

Although osteoarthritis can't be cured, it *can* be treated. Many treatments are often needed to control pain and improve joint function. Certain medications can help to relieve pain and reduce swelling; these include nonprescription oral pain relievers, or pain-relieving creams or sprays that can be applied to the skin around the joint. If stronger pain relief is needed, a prescription-strength medicine may be necessary. In some cases, medicine can be injected directly into the joint.

Exercise and losing weight are the most effective *non-drug* treatments for osteoarthritis: gaining just 1 pound increases the stress on knee and hip joints by 400%! Other non-drug treatments include applying heat or ice to the joints, using a heated pool or whirlpool, and wearing custom-made shoes and arch supports. Your healthcare provider may also recommend that you see a physical therapist to help you regain flexibility and relieve pain. You may also be advised to see an occupational therapist for evaluation of your home and work environments to be sure that equipment is appropriate to prevent stress and strain (eg, computer, table, and chairs are in the best position). If these treatments do not help, surgery may be recommended. Talk with your healthcare provider before starting any medication, exercise, or weight loss program.



### Can osteoarthritis be prevented?

Knowing about and controlling risk factors can help to reduce the chances that you'll develop osteoarthritis. Controlling weight and exercising can go a long way toward lowering your risk for osteoarthritis!

**REFERENCES:** American Academy of Family Physicians. Available at: <http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/pain/disorders/616.html> • American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Available at: <http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/main.cfm> • American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. Available at: <http://www.aapmr.org/condtreat/pain/osteo.htm> • American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society. Available at: <http://www.aofas.org/14a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3361> • Arthritis Foundation. Available at: [http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease\\_id=32](http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease_id=32) • National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. Available at: [http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health\\_Info/default.asp](http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/default.asp) • Sun BH et al. *Rheum Dis Clin NA*. 2007;33(1):135-148. All websites accessed October 29, 2007.

### What Causes Osteoarthritis?

Most of the time, there is no known cause for osteoarthritis. The following factors—alone or in combination—can contribute to osteoarthritis:

- ◆ Age is the greatest risk factor—by age 65, most people have osteoarthritis in one or more joints
- ◆ Obesity puts added stress on the joints
- ◆ An earlier injury (for example, a broken bone or severely torn *ligament*, the tissue that connects the joints)
- ◆ Sports or jobs that involve kneeling, squatting, walking, or heavy lifting
- ◆ Joints that are not formed correctly at birth
- ◆ Family history of osteoarthritis
- ◆ Other medical conditions that can damage cartilage

### What Are the Symptoms of Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis. Symptoms include:

- ◆ Joint stiffness, pain, and tenderness or swelling, especially in the morning or after long periods when you are not moving around
- ◆ The feeling or sound of bone rubbing on bone or grinding when you move
- ◆ Pain in the groin, knee, thigh, and/or buttocks; limping
- ◆ Some symptoms can also be found in other parts of the body, including the hips, knees, feet, or ankles, and hands

### For more information:

Talk to your healthcare provider or visit [www.LegDisorders.org](http://www.LegDisorders.org)

